

**OVID'S HEROIDES XIV  
(HYPERMNESTRA TO LYNCEUS):  
THE EPISTLE AS A LITERARY MICROCOSM**

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«The letter, the epistle, is not a genre but all genres, literature itself».  
DERRIDA, *La carte postale* (1980)

RESUMEN

Decía Derrida que la epístola no es un género, sino todos los géneros. En efecto, cada *Heroida* ovidiana es susceptible de ser considerada en sí como un microcosmos –que no un pastiche– de géneros literarios. ¿Y qué ocurre con los recursos narratológicos empleados en ellas? La *Heroida* 14, de Hipermestra a Linceo (por cierto una de las menos estudiadas del corpus), nos permitirá comprobar que esa misma exhaustividad se observa en el ámbito narrativo: duplicidad de autores (real y ficticio); multiplicidad de destinatarios (explícitos e implícitos); retrospectivas de mayor y menor alcance (incluyendo una digresión etiológica sobre Ío) y lúgubres proyecciones hacia el futuro (epitafio de la propia heroína); distintos tipos de discursos (apelación directa a Linceo y autoapóstofre deliberativo de Hipermestra); comentarios extradiegéticos cargados de emotividad; aceleración y desaceleración de la velocidad narrativa... Y todo ello sin salir del reducido marco epistolar, que sigue cumpliendo en su conjunto con las características y funciones del género: comunicación con un interlocutor ausente y deseo de respuesta (en este caso no en forma de carta, sino de acción por parte de Linceo).

*Palabras claves:* narratología, epístola de ficción, Ovidio, *Heroidas*.

## INTRODUCTION

The 14<sup>th</sup> Epistle of Ovid, the one from Hypermnestra to Lynceus, meets the requirements to be left out of some of the best monographs on the *Heroines*. There is no erotic desire in it, nor the spite that a heroine could show to her unfaithful lover. Works such as *The Egyptians* or *The Danaids* by Aeschylus, or Licinius Calvus' epyllion on Io, have been lost, when they would enable us to track intertextuality in this particular epistle. The myth offers many variants and dark sides, both in its origin and in its ending: we do not know, for instance, what caused the dispute between Danaus and Aegyptus, nor whether Danaus was tried for his sons-in-law's /nephews' murder or he simply died at the hands of Lynceus<sup>1</sup>.

However, from other points of view, this letter offers just as many incentives as the rest: the heroine is found motionless in a specific moment of the story (in the case of Hypermnestra also literally «motionless», since she is kept chained) and plunged into a deeply unfair situation without the prospect of resolution, which motivates a profound lamentation. But, as we will try to show, the static writing position is not incompatible with vivid, full-of-drama flashbacks, with the reproduction of direct discourse giving an account of the characters' feelings, and with flash-forwards marked by the gloomy tone of the overwhelming present.

It is precisely this last point that we would like to highlight: we will analyze the text from a narratological point of view, so as to study how the different parts are assembled, bearing in mind that some of them are small-scale representations of major genres. Nevertheless, we do not intend to dissect a corpse, but rather to see how the different members come together to form a living body: in fact, there is a driving force that –like blood– flows from one part to another.

For specific aspects such as textual criticism or metrics (interesting subject matters that cannot be treated here), Reeson's

1 To name just a couple of works, *Letter XIV* is absent in Lindheim's book, *Mail and Female. Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroines*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, and in F. Moya del Baño, *Estudio mitográfico de las Heroínas de Ovidio*, Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 1969.

commentary<sup>2</sup> can be used as a starting point. In the Appendix, you can find the full text of Epistle XIV translated by Grant Showerman into English prose, as well as the original Latin text.

### 1. THE EPISTOLARY FRAMEWORK

The *Heroides* might have been published at a certain point with the title *Epistulae heroidum*<sup>3</sup>, thus referring to one of its most plausible generic classifications. In fact, if we take a glance at what theoretical works about the epistolary genre say<sup>4</sup>, we see that Epistle XIV complies with several characteristics that are usually mentioned as essential: it is a text that someone writes to someone else who is absent in order to communicate something that the former cannot say (or does not want to say) orally. In our case, the first scenario is assumed, since there is a clear communication problem: Hypermnestra has been chained by her father and Lynceus has run away and is absent.

The epistle can indeed be analyzed as a communicative act according to Jakobson's functions of language<sup>5</sup>. In Epistle XIV, we observe that an intersubjective relationship is established between Hypermnestra's «I» (addresser or sender) and Lynceus' «you» (addressee or receiver). The message is the letter itself and the context is to a large extent the situation of the addresser («Kept close in the palace am I, bound with heavy chains», l. 3<sup>6</sup>), the addressee («the one brother left of so many but now alive», l. 1) and their relatives («the rest of the company lied dead by the crime of their brides», l. 2), with unavoidable reference to the events that took place on the wedding night.

2 J. Reeson, *Ovid Heroides 11, 13 and 14: A Commentary*, Leiden: Brill, 2001.

3 D. F. Kennedy, «Epistolarity: the *Heroides*». In *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, edited by Philip Hardie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 217-232, p. 219.

4 A. Achille; O. Deverne; M. Gellereau; É. Thoizet, *La lettre et le récit*, Paris: Bertrand-Lacoste, 1992. J. Harang, *L'épistolaire*, Paris: Hatier, 2002.

5 R. Jakobson, *Ensayos de lingüística general*, trad. por Josep. M. Puyol y Jem Cabanes, Barcelona: Ariel, 1984, p. 353.

6 Line numbers correspond to Ehwald's Latin edition in the Appendix. Reference to them allows the reader to check the distribution of information in the original letter.

Apart from the already mentioned referential function, the letter's ultimate goal leads to a preponderance of the conative function at the end of the letter. Hypermnestra wants Lynceus to react, but with a real action, not with an epistolary answer: «come bear me aid; or, if it pleases thee, abandon me to death, and, when my body is done with life, lay it in secret on the funeral pile, and bury my bones moistened with faithful tears» (l. 125 ss.). As expected in this type of letter, the expressive function plays an important role: the addresser refers to her feelings and mood, sometimes with noticeable interjections: «Lo, I, because you live, am kept for the torments of punishment» (l. 119). And, since this epistle is a literary exercise on Ovid's part, the poetic or esthetic function permeates the whole message.

Now that we mention Ovid's literary scope, let us briefly recall the implications of a fictional letter. The most important feature is the duplication of authors and addressees. In the first place, in our work two authors can be differentiated: the real author or writer, Ovid, and the textual or legendary author, Hypermnestra, which corresponds to the narrator. Ovid is responsible for establishing Hypermnestra as the narrator and for configuring the diegetic universe as a whole. The fact that Ovid is a man who gives voice to female characters in the *Heroines* has led scholars (among others, Lindheim<sup>7</sup> and Spentzou<sup>8</sup>) to explore the tensions and differences between them, above all referring to gender and ideology.

In the second place, as regards the letter's addressees, we should speak of multiplication instead of duplication. As the extradiegetic narratee, the Roman reader of the Augustan period<sup>9</sup> comes first to mind, but after that naturally all subsequent readers, including us. Kennedy<sup>10</sup> reminds us that the relation between Ovid and his (extradiegetic) reader is never fully determined or closed: «Other readers will succeed us, and can we foresee how the *Heroides*, and our readings of them, will be configured twenty, one hundred, two thousand years hence?». As for the intradiegetic nar-

7 S. H. Lindheim, *Mail and Female*, cit.

8 E. Spentzou, *Readers and writers in Ovid's Heroides. Transgressions of Genre and Gender*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

9 Cf. A. Barchiesi, *The Poet and the Prince. Ovid and Augustan Discourse*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

10 D. F. Kennedy, *Epistolarity*, cit. p. 213.

ratee, he is expressly cited in the body of the text: «Hypermnestra sends this letter to the one brother left of so many but now alive» (l. 1), «But do thou, O Lynceus, if thou carest aught for thy sister» (l. 123), etc. However, as we will see in the final section «Reading between the lines», there might be another implicit addressee in the diegetic universe.

The letter from Hypermnestra to Lynceus, like the rest of the *Letters of the Heroines*, is an independent epistle, in the sense that it is not inserted in a narrative (although there are obviously connections with the rest of the epistles in the collection). However, the letter itself contains distinct elements that join to form the epistle as a unit: a narration of events, like the exile and the Danaids' marriage, or the story of Io in the form of epyllion or mythological *exemplum*; and different types of speeches (Hypermnestra's soliloquy and appeal to Lynceus). Epistle XIV proves that the letter, as stated by A. J. Greimas<sup>11</sup>, is a compound object *par excellence*.

In this regard, scholars have usually highlighted the *Gattungskreuzung* or generic hybridization of the *Heroines*, as if they were microcosms that contain some of the great classical categories on a small scale: in our Epistle XIV, dramatic action as reminiscent of tragedy, Io's episode as a remnant of epic, or Hypermnestra's deliberative self-apostrophe as rhetorical imprint. So much so that in 1992 Friedrich Spoth<sup>12</sup> deemed it advisable to devote a monograph to the defense of the *Heroines'* elegiac nature.

Although we have here pointed out that the *Heroines* can be assigned to the epistolary genre, there is no obstacle to considering them elegies as well, since, as stated by Carmen Castrillo<sup>13</sup>, «elegy in Antiquity was only defined by its meter –an alternation of hexameter and pentameter– and there was no other constant, distinctive sign in the genre's history». Not even love. In fact, in Epistle XIV, as observed by Jacobson as well<sup>14</sup>, there is no trace of love in the whole letter, and other feelings like piety (*pietas*) and fear (*timor*) are the

11 Cited in Achille, *La lettre*, p. 23.

12 F. Spoth, *Ovids Heroides als Elegien*, München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1992.

13 C. Castrillo González, "Elegía". In *Géneros literarios latinos*, edited by Carmen Coñoer, Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1987, pp. 86-113, p. 87.

14 H. Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 125.

ones that prevail. For this reason, Lindheim's monograph devoted to "desire" in the *Heroines* does not include number XIV.

However, in Hypermnestra's letter there are some other characteristics that are considered as staple features in elegy, such as the autobiographical form –subjective or personal, as we have mentioned (poetry from *I* to *you*); the recusatio of warlike elements, as expressed by Hypermnestra in her monologue («What have swords to do with me? What has a girl to do with the weapons of war? More suited to my hands are the distaff and the wool», ll. 65-6), or the general tone of lamentation and despair («My own years, look you, give me matter for lament», l. 110).

One of the controversies that are pertinent when discussing the *Heroines* is the opposition between objective elegy (as cultivated by Alexandrine poets who wrote about the loves of mythological figures) and the subjective elegy of Latin roots (in which the poet, in the first person, presents parts of his life as plausible). It should be noted that Boucher<sup>15</sup> denied that distinction decades ago, basing his argument on the ontological distance between the real author and his/her poetic *person*. In effect, as shown in Letter XIV, Ovid combines both sides: on the one hand, he uses «objective» mythological material he had received from tradition (Aeschylus' trilogy composed of *Suppliants*, *Aegyptians* and *Danaids*; Horace's ode 3.11), and, on the other hand, he applies to it the mold of "subjectivity" in the mouth of a poetic *I*. Nevertheless, the «objective» version of the myth offers the possibility to work with variations: the exclusion of Hypermnestra's love motivation when saving Lynceus seems fundamentally Ovidian, since Horace did mention the goddess Venus in his poem («Go; speed your flight o'er land and wave, / While Night and Venus shield you, l. 49-50»<sup>16</sup>).

While –hopefully– the reader's benevolence shields us, let us put the text itself under the microscope and allow it to speak to us.

15 Cited in Castrillo, *Elegía*, cit., p. 89.

16 Horace, *The Odes and Carmen Saeculare of Horace*, translated by John Conington, London: George Bell and Sons, 1882.

## 2. HYPERMNESTRA BOUND

As already mentioned, Ovid, as a real and empirical entity, establishes Hypermnestra as textual author, fictitious entity or «paper being»<sup>17</sup> corresponding to the figure of narrator. In the fictional world, it is she who has the role to utter the discourse as protagonist in the narrative communication. Furthermore, we observe that narrated events and experiences have Hypermnestra as the story's main character: it is therefore an autodiegetic narrator. The use of the first person («Kept close in the palace am I», l. 3, «I am charged with crime», l. 6) is due to the overlap between narrator and protagonist.

The letter starts with a quasi-performative statement in the present («Hypermnestra sends this letter to the one brother left of so many», l. 1) and we observe that in the following lines there is a predominance of Latin present tenses (*iacet*, l. 2; *teneor*, l. 3; *est*, l. 4; *sum*, l. 6, etc.). This implies a simultaneous narration, in which the narrative act coincides temporally with the development of the story. Therefore, there is a time overlap between narrator and protagonist. As regards the narrative perspective, it is Hypermnestra as character who becomes the subject of focalization and offers her point of view, so we have the internal focalization mode. And how does Hypermnestra present herself?

This section's title («Hypermnestra bound», inspired by Aeschylus) alludes to the fact that she insists on her present prostration, which opens and closes the epistle in a sort of ring composition. Right after the dedication (l. 1) and the summary of the events that will be explained throughout the letter («the rest of the company lied dead by the crime of their brides», l. 2), Hypermnestra refers to herself being imprisoned and bound: «Kept close in the palace am I, bound with heavy chains; and the cause of my punishment is that I was faithful» (l. 3). The last two lines of the epistle refer back to «heavy chains», but with a different formulation: «my hand falls with the weight of my chains» (l. 131-2). However, according to the overall querulous tone, the main character does not hesitate to reiterate her pitiful situation over and over, but with the

17 Barthes' definition, cited in C. Reis; A. C. M. Lopes, *Dicionário de Narratologia*, Coimbra: Livraria Almedina, 1987, p. 249.

most elegant variation: «I am charged with crime» (l. 6), «thrust in gaol» (l. 84).

Some scholars<sup>18</sup> have referred to the letter's scant inter-communicative scope, based on a series of cumulative signs: the addressee is not mentioned by name at the beginning («the one brother left of so many but now alive», l. 1); the second person does not appear until line 19 («She *you* think capable of having compassed her husband's death»); and we have to wait until line 123 to find the anthroponym Lynceus, this time in an expressive vocative («But do thou, O Lynceus, if thou carest aught for thy sister»).

In fact, in the first sixteen lines we have the sensation of witnessing Hypermnestra's inner monologue. To the detriment of real communication, more space is given to the representation of her stream of consciousness: she explores –rather spontaneously– the present of her mental activity. After having explained in one line the fate suffered by the rest of the Aegyptians («the rest of the company lied dead by the crime of their brides», l. 2), and after having referred to the conditions in which she is writing («Kept close in the palace am I, bound with heavy chains», l. 2), Hypermnestra shows her inner restlessness, a result of the magnitude of the developments. Evidence of this distress is the mixing of real and imaginary components: on the one hand, she mentions the objective reason for her imprisonment («Because my hand shrank from driving into your throat the steel, I am charged with crime», ll. 5-6), but on the other hand she imagines what her situation would be if she had committed the crime («I should be praised, had I but dared the deed», l. 6). What is more, she gives free rein to a series of macabre potentialities that may emerge from her father's wrath: «My father may burn me with the flame I would not violate, and hold to my face the torches that shone at my marriage rites; or he may lay to

18 Perhaps Laurel Fulkerson («Chain(ed) Mail: Hypermnestra and the Dual Readership of *Heroides* 14», *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 113, 2003, pp. 123-145) is the author that has insisted most on that fact (see section «Reading between the lines»); but also Jean-Christophe Jolivet (*Allusion et fiction épistolaire dans les "Héroïdes. Recherches sur l'intertextualité ovidienne*, Rome: École française de Rome, 2001, p. 237), who highlights that Propertius, in his letter from Arethusa to Lycota (Ovid's precedent), never breaks the illusion of epistolary communication, while this is not the case in Ovid: he multiplies apostrophes to third persons, returns to the past and refers to facts that supposedly the addressee already knows.



my throat the sword he falsely gave me, so that I, the wife, may die the death my husband did not die» (ll. 8-10).

Hypermnestira seems more concerned about justifying herself for what she has done –according to piety and suitability (*decorum*)– than about convincing Lynceus of a possible conjugal or affective motivation for her actions. The verb *praestat* («to be preferable») points in this direction («Better be charged with crime than thus to have pleased my sire», l. 7), as well as *piget* and *paenitet* («to repent of a thing»): «I feel no regret at having hands free from the shedding of blood» (l. 8); «he will not bring my dying lips to say “I repent me!”» (ll. 13-14); «she is not faithful who regrets her faith» (l. 14). Note, by the way, the judgmental character of several statements by Hypermnestira, as is suited to an autodiegetic narrator who is prone to subjectivity and value judgments: «she is not faithful who regrets her faith», (l. 14), «Let repentance for crime come to Danaus and my cruel sisters; this is the wonted event that follows on wicked deeds» (ll. 15-16).

### 3. BLOOD WEDDING

Until now (ll. 15-16), as far as narrative speed is concerned, isochrony has been maintained, as is proper to the monologic nature of Hypermnestira's introduction: conventionally (for the reader's reading pace should also be taken into account), the narrative discourse has an identical duration as the narrated story. However, from line 21 onwards, the narrator speeds up the discourse, summing up in a few lines the wedding among Egyptians and Danaids and the following events. In other words, she offers the addressee (Lynceus but also us) a «summary»<sup>19</sup> of the wedding night, which, due to its bloodthirstiness, would go by in slow motion for the protagonist.

Lines 17-21 offer an excellent transition from the present tense of the epistolary opening to the summary's past tense. The key word is without doubt *admonitu* (l. 17), followed by the genitive *temeratae (sanguine) noctis* («the remembrance of that night profaned

19 This is a narratology term. Cf. for instance Reis, *Dicionário*, cit., p. 378.

with blood»): this line anticipates the flashback unambiguously. The remembrance of the most recent events carries Hypermnestra to a state of terror, as expressed by two verbs (*pavet*, «to be terrified», l. 17; *timet*, «to fear». l. 20) and a noun (*tremor*, «trembling», l. 18). Scholars, among them Landolfi<sup>20</sup> and Reeson<sup>21</sup>, highlight that in this passage we can intuit that the hand will have a predominant role in the epistle: «sudden trembling fetters the bones of my right hand. She you think capable of having compassed her husband's death fears even to write of murder done by hands not her own!» (ll. 18-20). It is the heroine's right hand (*dextra*) that held the sword in that dreadful night (l. 45), the same hand that now fears even to put the events into written form. It is indeed a splendid metonymy that goes all through the letter until the end («my hand falls with the weight of my chains», ll. 131-132), but, in my opinion, Hypermnestra strives to show that her whole person is terrified: «my heart is struck with fear» (l. 17), «my blood retreated, warmth left my body and soul» (l. 37). Even when speaking about the hand, it is significant that the trembling reaches the bones (l. 18), that is to say, her very core.

«Yet I shall essay to write» (l. 21) is a beautiful expression of spontaneity that helps Hypermnestra to start the wedding account and, at the same time, it is a rhetorical common-place that reflects her reluctance to narrate past misfortunes<sup>22</sup>. The flashback initiated here (l. 21) runs down to line 84, where Io's character appears, leading to an even more distant point in time. However, for reasons of clarity, we will examine lines 21-52 first, before moving on to Hypermnestra's self-apostrophe.

A point that we would like to highlight is Hypermnestra's intrusive capability as narrator and main character in the narrated events. A naïve reader could understand line 22 as a mere time allusion («it was the last part of day and the first of night»), and might also have the impression of a royal wedding, as sumptuous as the

20 L. Landolfi, *Scribentis imago. Eroine ovidiane e lamento epistolare*, Bologna: Pàtron, 2000, p. 222 ss.

21 Reeson, *Ovid Heroides*, cit., p. 236 ss.

22 Reeson (*ibidem*, p. 237) reminds us that the model was Virgil: *quamquam animus meminisse horret luctuque refugit/ incipiam* (*Aen.* 2.12-3) ("although my soul shudders to remember and flees from the grief, I shall begin").

ones celebrated by the Habsburgs in Vienna's Augustinian Church («on every side shine bright the lamps girt round with gold», l. 25). This beginning (l. 22) is, however, deeply ironic: Egyptians still enjoy light (= life), but they will soon sink into the shadows of death. The narrator's comments in form of adjectives or appositions allow us to suspect the real dimension of tragedy: «our husbands' father himself receives the *armed* brides of his sons» (l. 24); «*unholy* incense is scattered on *unwilling* altar-fires» (l. 26); «the crowd cry "Hymen, Hymenaeus!" The god *shuns their cry*» (l. 27); «all joyously they burst into the bridal chambers – *the bridal chambers, their own tombs!* – and with their bodies press the couches that deserve to be *funeral beds*» (ll. 31-2).

The description of the Egyptians' carefree sleep («heavy with food and wine they lay in sleep, and deep repose had settled on Argos, free from care», ll. 33-34) is full of irony and make us inevitably think of the stupor that preceded the fall of Troy, as told by the epic. In l. 35 we move from the first or third person plural (*ducimur*, l. 23; *feruntur*, l. 31; *premunt*, l. 32) to the first person singular (*videbar*, l. 35; *audibam, verebar* l. 36). The camera focuses again on Hypermnestra. But, while at the beginning of the epistle we saw her under the heavy weight of chains, in this new scene we see her in the solemn dress of the tragic heroine («purple robes», l. 51). The «groans of dying men» (l. 35) make Hypermnestra lay chill on her bed, a bed that should have served as wedded couch («and on my newly-wedded couch all chill I lay», l. 38). As in tragedy, the bloody scene is out of the heroine's sight, and she only hears the cries (note again the sensation of spontaneity in «I seemed to hear the groans of dying men; nay, I heard indeed», ll. 35-6). Furthermore, in line with the passage's epic-tragic tone, she describes her quiver with a naturalistic double simile: «as the gentle zephyr sets a-quiver the slender stalk of grain, as wintry breezes shake the poplar leaves, even thus – yea even more – did I tremble» (ll. 39-41).

From line 41 onwards, we enter the scene with Hypermnestra and Lynceus, who until now had not appeared in the wedding account. As the letter's addressee, Hypermnestra refers to him in the second person: «yourself lay quiet; the wine I had given you was the wine of sleep» (ll. 41-2). Here begins the fragment that could

be defined as a «confession letter»<sup>23</sup>: in it, the narrator-character admits that she was on the verge of committing the crime, following her violent father's orders (l. 43). Great signs of verisimilitude are her declaration of sincerity («I will not tell you aught untrue», l. 45) and her insistence on the truth («let me confess to you the truth!», l. 47), as well as the anaphor *admovi iugulo* («I brought it to your throat») at the beginning of lines 47 and 48, which symbolizes her difficulty in disclosing the most uncomfortable reality. It is important to emphasize the use of iterative discourse (narrative frequency) through the adverb *ter* («*thrice* did my hand raise high the piercing blade, and *thrice*, having basely raised it, fell again», ll. 45-6), used by Hypermnestra to rush through three identical attempts of which she cannot be proud. For that reason, she attributes the action metonymically to her hand and she points out that the sword was «basely raised», thus condemning it morally<sup>24</sup>.

In fact, Hypermnestra does not take long to return to those traits she has chosen as the most suitable for her «autobiography»: dread (*timor*, l. 49), sense of duty (*pietas*, l. 49) and chastity (*casta dextra*, l. 50). She discharges again any responsibility (it is *her father's* weapon, l. 48), and, before reproducing the words she addressed to herself, she rends the purple robes she wore and her hair in despair (l. 51).

#### 4. NEEDLE AND THREAD FOR THE FEMALE

In line 52 Hypermnestra slows down the pace of the analepsis that is devoted to the wedding night and she presents us with her soliloquy or self-apostrophe in direct speech, where she weighs the pros and cons of killing Lynceus (ll. 53-56). If it were not for the introductory line («I spoke with scant sound such words as these», l. 52), we could think of an unspoken inner monologue, since several of its features are present: it transcribes Hypermnestra's mental discourse or stream of consciousness and the rendering of psychic content reflects spontaneity («But come», l. 57), anxiety and chaos.

23 J. Harang (*L'épistolaire*, cit., p. 60) includes the «lettre confession» among the «correspondence intime».

24 Cf. Reeson, *Ovid Heroides*, cit., p. 258.

The asyndetic juxtaposition of ideas makes us believe that Hypermnestra organizes her discourse by association (see, for instance, ll. 53/54: «A cruel father, Hypermnestra, thine; perform thy sire's command, let thy husband there go join his brethren!»).

However, Hypermnestra's complaint is uttered in a soft voice (l. 67), which contributes to the feeling of delirium that grips the main character. In fact, she hears two different voices. The first one speaks in the second person («A cruel father, Hypermnestra, thine», l. 53; «But come, while he lies there, do like as the brave sisters», l. 57): it is an external voice that argues in favor of committing the crime. In contrast, the second voice speaks in the first person («A woman am I, and a maid, gentle in nature and in years», l. 55): it rejects the crime and it identifies with Hypermnestra's real position, the one that will triumph in the dialectic confrontation. Arguments for the crime alternate with arguments against the crime, as if in a pendulum swing, as described by Augustin F. Sabot<sup>25</sup>.

This accumulation of reasons for both positions reminds us of the kind of rhetorical exercises that Ovid would practice during his youth. Nothing prevents us from seeing in Hypermnestra's self-apostrophe a deliberative *suasoria*, since the goal of each part is to persuade the heroine to behave in a certain way. But this deliberative speech has certain tragic reminiscences: it is the means that tragic characters use to utter their internal struggle, such as Medea in Euripides' celebrated play. We should not forget that Hypermnestra is dressed in royal purple robes, as stated by her in line 51.

Nevertheless, many other tiles of the tessellation remind us that we are in an elegiac context. For instance, *exiguus* («scanty») in line 52 is a clear genre indicator, and equally elegiac are the assertions of what Sabot calls «poetry of tenderness» (1976, 340): the woman's natural weakness, even more so if she is young («A woman am I, and a maid, gentle in nature and in years», l. 55); her hands are tender (*molles*, l. 56) and more suited for the working of wool («More suited to my hands are the distaff and the wool», l. 66); holding war weapons seems incongruous to her as a woman («What have swords to do with me? What has a girl to do with the weapons of war?», l. 65); and she is unable to kill someone, not

25 A. F. Sabot, *Ovide, poète de l'amour dans ses œuvres de jeunesse: Amores, Héroïdes, Ars amatoria, Remedia amoris, De Medicamine Faciei Femineae*, Paris: Ophrys, 1976, p. 319.

even herself («Yet had this hand power to deal out murder at all, it would be bloody with the death of its own mistress», ll. 59-60) –at the end of the epistle Hypermnestra asks Lynceus to save her or kill her, because she is not able to commit suicide; and finally she cannot go against her tremendous sense of duty (*pietas*), one of Hypermnestra's inherent traits («What crime have I committed that I must not be free from guilt?», l. 64).

In the end, tenderness and elegy win: Hypermnestra rejects weapons, and Ovid the highest genres (but not fully, as we have seen and will see). The self-apostrophe has not encouraged Hypermnestra to fulfil her father's command. Quite the opposite, she acknowledges the distaff and the wool as her most suitable instruments, and she sheds all but virile tears: «while I utter my complaint, my tears follow forth the words that start them» (l. 67). She could not imitate her brave sisters (*fortis sorores*, l. 57), but on the other hand she displays the most refined rhetorical and literary knowledge –certainly not the realm of a woman in Antiquity. Does not Ovid betray his policy of «needle and thread for the female»? As stated by Jean-Christophe Jolivet<sup>26</sup>, «this subtle interplay of references results in a true speech of erudition that is assumed by the poet and that, in a certain way, ultimately parasitizes the *pathos* of the monodramas that the letters constitute».

## 5. THE ABSTENTION PROVES THE RULE

With «thus I to myself» (*haec ego*, l. 67), the narrator indicates that her soliloquy is finished and that she is resuming the narration of events, and this time she does so through the historic present in order to provide a sense of immediacy («my tears follow forth the words that start them, and from my eyes fall down upon your body», l. 67-; «While you grope for my embrace and toss your slumberous arms, your hand is almost wounded by my blade», l. 69). Not until lines 71 and 72 does she go back to the past («fear of my father seized on me...; I drove away your sleep with these words of mine»), but only for one distich, and then she returns to the historic present.

26 J.-C. Jolivet, *Allusion et fiction*, cit., 2001, p. 212.

The scene in which Hypermnestira awakens Lynceus and he runs away takes only a few lines, barely ten including the moments preceding his awakening (67-78). This narratological speed reflects the rush in Hypermnestira's reaction when she suddenly realized that daylight was approaching («And now fear of my father seized on me, and of my father's minions, and of the light of dawn», l. 71). Tears, that in other Ovidian epistles fall upon the letter and stain it with blots<sup>27</sup>, belong here to the past of narrated events: they presumably awaken Lynceus, who, still sleeping, gropes for Hypermnestira's embrace and tosses his slumberous arms (l. 69). As highlighted by Reeson<sup>28</sup>, Hypermnestira is less reticent to show Lynceus' feelings than her own. But, with this gesture, Lynceus is about to get hurt («your hand is almost wounded by my blade», l. 70), and this reminds us that embraces and swords are incompatible (for Spoth<sup>29</sup>, this is a further allusion to literary genres).

Paradoxically, Hypermnestira, the only one of the Danaids that did not commit the crime, fears the light of dawn, as is the case with wrongdoers; hence the short but convincing direct speech with which she urges Lynceus to flee, taking only one distich and opened by «these words of mine» (l. 72): «Rise up, away, O child of Belus, the one brother left of so many but now alive! This night unless you haste, will be forever night to you!» (ll. 73-74). She addresses him in the same way as in line 1 («the one brother left of so many but now alive», l. 1), and in line 80 she explains the reason for this naming: «You alone lack to make the crime complete». On the other hand, she picks up the image of night as a synonym of death, already used in line 22 to foretell the ill-fated events that were about to take place. Lynceus arises and beholds the sword in Hypermnestira's hands, but, when he asks the cause (l. 77), she answers in just two and a half dactyls: *dum nox sinit, effuge* («While night permits, fly», l. 77). We meet again the learned author, who plays with references to Horace's ode 3.11: (*surge [...] dum favet nox et Venus*, «Go; speed your flight o'er land and wave, while night and Venus shield

27 For instance, the one from Briseis to Achilles (*Whatever blots you observe, were occasioned by my tears*, l. 3) or the one from Shappo to Phaon (*I write, and, as I write, the starting tears flow from my eyes: see what a number of blots stain this very place*, l. 97-8).

28 J. Reeson, *Ovid Heroides*, cit., p. 273.

29 F. Spoth, *Ovids Heroides* cit., p. 196.

you») and Catullus' poem 5 («But we, extinguished once our tiny light,/ perforce shall slumber through one lasting night!», ll. 5-6).

We come to the denouement, outlined in only seven lines (ll. 78-84) in historic present and opened by the powerful anaphora of the night: «While the dark night permits, you fly, and I remain» (l. 78). Lynceus flies, but Hypermnestra remains –maybe out of *pietas* towards her father? (this aspect will be considered in the section «Reading between the lines»). For Spoth<sup>30</sup>, the statement «you fly, and I remain» is the reversal of the elegiac standard, since it is normally conceived as a reproach of infidelity.

In any case, it has already dawned («'Twas early morn», l. 79, note the absolute concision) when Danaus shows up. Hypermnestra has previously presented him as cruel (*saevus*); here he is seen as cold and calculating: «Danaus counted o'er his sons-in'-law that lay there slain. You alone lack to make the crime complete. He bears ill the loss of a single kinsman's death, and complains that too little blood was shed» (79-82). He does not even listen to his daughter's pleas when she falls to his knees («I am dragged from my father's feet», l. 83) and, with tragic echoes, she is seized by the hair and put in jail (l. 83). This time, it is the narrator's extradiegetic comment («such reward my love for duty won!», l. 84) that brings us back to the elegy's tone of lamentation. The conclusion is devastating: «I am thrust in gaol», l. 84. At this point we go back to the starting position of line 3 («Kept close in the palace am I, bound with heavy chains»), although here the word *carcer* («gaol») is more overwhelming than *domus* (in our text translated as «palace»). At this point of the epistle, Lynceus already knows the fate suffered by Hypermnestra, but he must bear in mind how cruelly she (his savior) was treated so that her cry for help at the end of the epistle (l. 123 ss.) may be listened to.

By the way, in the title of this section we spoke of «abstention», and in fact this is one of the favorite subjects for scholars dealing with Epistle XIV: did Lynceus respect Hypermnestra's virginity? The text has contradictory allusions: in line 55 Hypermnestra presents herself as «a woman and a maid», but at the end of the letter (l. 123) she refers to a certain gift (*munera*) she rendered him. How-

30 *Idem.*



ever, the only abstention we can be sure of is the abstention from murder.

6. HEAVEN, HERE LYING ALL FORLORN,  
I DESIRE FROM THEE TO KNOW

Until now, *Hypermnestra* has referred almost obsessively to *pietas* as the most important trait of her ethopoeia: «the cause of my punishment is that I was faithful (l. 4); yet he will not bring my dying lips to say "I repent me!" . She is not faithful who regrets her faith» (ll. 13-14); «What crime have I committed that I must not be free from guilt?» (*esse piae*, l. 64); «such reward my love for duty won!», (l. 84). *Castitas* («purity of morals») must be added to *pietas*: «my chaste right hand refused the task enjoined» (l. 50). In the light of this integrity, *Hypermnestra*, like *Sigismund*, wonders what crime she has committed. The answer is clear (*scilicet*, l. 85): she carries the weight of an inherited guilt, a tragic curse that has been placed upon her and her lineage.

We have just seen how fast a narratological speed is used to describe *Lynceus'* flight, *Danaus'* arrival and *Hypermnestra's* imprisonment: all this takes barely ten lines. Now, speed is suspended to allow the reader (above all the extradiegetic one, since *Lynceus* would be fully aware of that part of his own story) to enjoy a delightful etiological digression in 25 lines, inserted as a sort of Hellenistic or Neoteric epyllion. With this analepsis we go further back in time, since *Io's* metamorphosis into a heifer belongs to the remote mythological past («Clear it is that *Juno's* wrath endures from the time the mortal maid became a heifer, and the heifer became a goddess», ll. 85-86).

The narrator takes the plot of the story for granted, and it is summarized in only one distich (ll. 85-86). After that (ll. 86-92) she tells us in the third person how the maid, newly transformed into a heifer (*nova vacca*, l. 89), has not fully recognized the dimensions of the drama. When *Io* stands on the banks of the river *Inachus*, her father, she beholds the horns that were not her own (l. 90), and when she tries to complain, she can only give lowing forth (l. 91): «she felt terror at her form, and terror at her voice» (l. 92).

From the beginning, Hypermnestra regrets Io's undeserved punishment: «Yet it is punishment enough that the tender maid was a lowing beast» (l. 87).

However, Hypermnestra's emotion is so deep that, from line 93 onwards, she starts apostrophizing Io in the second person (a second person that is not addressed, as one would expect in the framework of an epistle, to Lynceus, the narratee). No less than six times Hypermnestra asks questions that indicate how futile it is to find explanations for her new condition and to try to run away: «Why rage, unhappy one? Why gaze at thyself in the water's shadow? Why count the feet thou hast for thy new-created frame?» (ll. 93-94); «What is the cause of thy flight? Why doest thou wander over the long seas?» (l. 103); «Child of Inachus, whither doest thou haste?» (l. 105). The vocatives *infelix* (unhappy one) and *Inachi* (child of Inachus) reinforce the apostrophe. This *infelix*, as well as the line in which we see Io grazing («must quiet thy fierce hunger with the leafy branch and grassy turf», l. 96), reminds us of Licinius Calvus' vehement line that we have extant from his lost epyllion: «Ah, wretched girl, you will feed on bitter grasses» (*a virgo infelix, herbis pasceris amaris*).

The identification between Io and Hypermnestra works in several layers. Io tries to flee, but she falls prey to her destiny, same as the Danaid, who is held prisoner by her father: «Thou wilt not be able to fly from thine own features» (l. 104). Like Hypermnestra, the Inachid is a «tender maid» (l. 87) who tries to complain about her destiny (l. 91), but neither of these complaints transcends: in the first case, it is recorded in a letter that the addressee will probably not receive; in the second case, the protagonist has lost the articulate speech that is part of human nature. Both maids hold weapons that are not suitable for them, be it a sword (*ensis*, l. 45), be it horns considered as weapons («fear lest the arms thou bearest may wound thyself», l. 98). And both of them, facing deplorable circumstances, are seized with panic (*territa*, l. 92; *times*, l. 98).

Therefore, it seems that in this passage Hypermnestra gives free rein to her feelings, until now repressed, and projects her emo-

tions on the myth. Contrary to Jolivet<sup>31</sup>, who perceives Io's story as a learned and literary game on Ovid's part, for Jacobson<sup>32</sup> this evocation does not clash with Hypermnestra's restrained characterization: «But psychologically there is a deeper value to this digression. Herein we find the emotion, the pathetic and angered outbursts, the complaints, the interjections of feelings which are missing elsewhere in the poem». In other words, Hypermnestra finds here an escape route for feelings she does not dare to show to an almost unknown husband.

In any case, as we have tried to prove, references work both at an intradiegetic and at an extradiegetic level. We cannot deny that Ovid, like his character Io (*fonte bibis*, l. 97), drinks from the sources. In 107, the narrator again uses the third person to offer the mythical denouement of her ancestor in just a distich: «The Nile, let flow to the sea through seven mouths, strips from the maddened heifer the features loved of Jove» (ll. 107-8). Hypermnestra realizes she has dawdled far too long and resumes the account of her own hardships with a transition question: «Why talk of far-off things, told me by hoary eld?» (ll. 109-10). In his poem 64, Catullus marks the end of his epyllion on Ariadne and Theseus with a similar question: «But for what cause should I, from early subject digressing, tell of the daughter...» (l. 116). Ovid masterfully adds: «My own years, look you, give me matter for lament» (l. 110). With the verb *querar*, Ovid seems to highlight that the epic digression has come to an end and that we go back to the elegiac lamentation, more relevant here (*ecce*). Those who want to know more –we could say *a posteriori*– will have to wait until *Metamorphoses'* book I, where they will enjoy the little modifications that make every variation valuable. For instance, whereas in our epistle Io loses her beauty when transformed into a cow («but now so fair, could not retain Jove's love», l. 88), in *Metamorphoses* the transformation does not dwindle her beauty (*bos quoque formosa est*, «even in the form of a heifer she still was beautiful», 1.611).

31 J.-C. Jolivet, *Allusion et fiction*, cit., p. 215.

32 H. Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, cit., p. 134.

## 7. IF LAMENTATIONS AND COMPLAINTS COULD REIN

Among her own reasons for lament, Hypermnestra adds now a new one<sup>33</sup>, situated halfway between her ancestor Io and the wedding that was narrated at the beginning of the poem (l. 21 ss.). It is the exile of Danaus and his daughters after the dispute between the two brothers, Danaus and Aegyptus: «My father and my uncle are at war; we are driven from our realms and from our home; we are cast away to the farthest parts of earth» (l. 111-2). It seems that Hypermnestra continues to identify with Io (the verb *vagamur*, in the first person, would allude to that). According to Jacobson<sup>34</sup> and –following his lead– Reeson<sup>35</sup>, Ovid chooses here the most painful myth variant, since in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* Danaus and his daughters go to Argos (not exactly «the farthest part of earth»), and they do so of their own free will, considering it as a pleasant return to their homeland. The same applies to the description of Danaus as *senex* («old»), contrasting with his powerful and violent image in the rest of the poem.

Be that as it may, the narrator deems it necessary to summarize once more the outcome of the subsequent tragedy («Of the number of the brothers but a scantest part remains», l. 115), but now she shows her emotions more vehemently, as if under the driving force that governed Io's epyllion. This time she focuses on the consequences for her own person: she feels sorry both for her brothers/cousins and for her sisters («For those who were done to death, and for those who did the deed, I weep», l. 115), insofar as she has lost them all at the same time: «as many brothers as I have lost, so many sisters also have I lost» (l. 117). If, as she dreads, she is also put to death, Lynceus will be the only one to survive out of the hundred («once the hundredth member of a kindred throng, of whom one brother only now remains», ll. 121-2). The prefigura-

33 Some editions, among them the one by Ehwald, move line 114 (*cum sene nos inopi turba vagamur inops* – «we, helpless band, must wander in exile with our aged, helpless sire») to 62. But if we accept Dorrie's edition, who follows for line 62 the majority of manuscripts (*quae tamen externis danda forent generis*), this would be the exile's first mention. For the discussion, see Reeson, *Ovid Heroides*, cit., p. 267 ss.

34 H. Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, cit., p. 135.

35 Reeson, *Ovid Heroides*, cit. p. 301.

tion of such a destiny leads Hypermnestra to apply to herself the same adjective she had used for Io, *infelix* (l. 122).

Tears come again to her eyes («Let both their companies receive my tears!», l. 118) and we reach what is probably the most emotional line in the epistle: «Lo, I, because you live, am kept for the torments of punishment» (l. 119). Hypermnestra paves the way for the request she is going to make next, and she states clearly the reason for her imprisonment: having spared Lynceus. She picks up the *topos* of unfair punishment («but what shall be the fate of guilt, when I am charged with crime for deeds of praise?», l. 120). Jacobson<sup>36</sup> wonders whether we can detect here «a twinge of regret», and if so, it is probably due to the increased fatigue of writing (ll. 131-2). The external reader knows, however, that our main character will escape the punishment suffered by the rest of the Danaids (in *Metamorphoses* 4.462-3 we see them hauling the water they are doomed to lose: «And, O Belides, (plotter of sad death upon thy cousins) thou art always doomed to dip forever ever-spilling waves!»).

## 8. DO UT DES

In line 123 we come to the most communicative part of the epistle, the one that would justify its consideration as such. First, we find the vocative *Lynceu*, and it is the first time that Hypermnestra addresses her interlocutor by name; previously she had used the generic «you» or the periphrasis «the one brother left of so many but now alive». Here Hypermnestra requests a response from Lynceus, but not a linguistic one in the form of a letter. The Danaid wants Lynceus to come in person –the same as Penelope demanded from Ulysses in the beginning of her letter: «write not any answer, but come yourself» (l. 2).

Hypermnestra's elegiac helplessness reaches its highest point when she admits her inability to decide her fate unilaterally. She offers Lynceus two possibilities: «come bear me aid; or, if it pleases

36 H. Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, cit., p. 131.

thee, abandon me to death» (l. 125). Ovid portrays a heroine whose immediate future is marked by complete uncertainty, with two alternatives that are absolutely opposed: life, if Lynceus is able to save her; or irremediable death. Hypermnestra has described her attempt to slit her husband's throat («thrice did my hand raise high the piercing blade, and thrice, having basely raised it, fell again», ll. 45-6), confessing that in any event she could only think of hurting herself («Yet had this hand power to deal out murder at all, it would be bloody with the death of its own mistress», ll. 59-60). However, when the moment arrives, her strength gives out due to dread and the weight of chains («my hand falls with the weight of my chains, and very fear takes away my strength», ll. 131-2). The unrealizable potentiality of the *protasis* is confirmed (l. 59). Hypermnestra is not able to commit suicide, either because she is hindered or because she lacks the courage. Hence the imperative *dede neci*, «abandon me to death» (l. 125).

Jacobson<sup>37</sup> draws attention to the imperative *dede neci* («put me to death»), saying that it must not be taken literally: the author suggests that Lynceus' omission of help would mean death for her, and therefore it must be translated –as our translator does– like «abandon me to death» (at the hands of Danaus, we assume). In other words, Lynceus cannot respond with another abstention, since that would be unworthy of the gift<sup>38</sup> he had received from her pious sister («if thou art worthy of the gift I rendered thee», l. 124).

And now we find again Ovid's delightful self-indulgence. Far from leaving us with this terrible alternative, he makes his narrator-character elaborate the second part of the disjunctive: she imagines how she would like her own epitaph to be if she finally dies. Although this is a commonplace in elegy (reinforced by Lynceus' faithful tears, l. 127), Jacobson reminds us that *titulus* is rather a male (or heroic) term, in accordance with the content of the inscription self: it records Hypermnestra's glorious deed, as well as her main trait (*pietas*, l. 129) and her onerous condition as

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 309.

<sup>38</sup> Scholars see in this *munera* one further point to foster the controversy about whether Hypermnestra and Lynceus had sexual intercourse during the wedding night.

exiled: «“Exiled Hypermnestra, as the unjust price of her wifely deed, has herself endured the death she warded from her brother!”» (ll. 129-130).

This window to the future leaves an intriguing aftertaste, although, according to tradition, most myth variants were more favorable to Hypermnestra than she could imagine: trial and punishment of Danaus and the Danaids, and the survival of Hypermnestra, who would found a royal dynasty at Argos. Ovidian irony works in favor of Hypermnestra, who now sinks into fatigue and dread, not by accident the last word of the poem (*timor*): «I would write more; but my hand falls with the weight of my chains, and very fear takes away my strength» (ll. 131-2). A genuine elegiac end. In addition, the epistle closes with the characteristic ring composition, with reference to the writing conditions mentioned at the beginning.

## 9. READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Within the «possible world» created by epistolary fiction, and as is the case with most *Letters of the Heroines*<sup>39</sup>, the likelihood that the letter will reach Lynceus is rather scant: where is Lynceus now? Which middleman or middlewoman will be able to avoid the paternal guard and put the letter in circulation? Is it not more probable that Danaus intercepts his daughter's letter and, moved by intrigue and anger, examines its content?

For Laurel Fulkerson<sup>40</sup>, Hypermnestra's letter is cleverly designed to adapt to two possible intradiegetic readers: the express addressee, Lynceus, and Hypermnestra's father, Danaus, who is highly likely to become an intrusive reader. From this second perspective, Fulkerson analyzes the signs that are explicit in the text. The most evident one is that Lynceus' name does not appear until

39 Louis Claude Purser (cited in Kennedy, *Epistolarity*, cit., p. 129) was convinced that epistolary communication was unviable in the *Heroides*, and he highlighted that, for instance, in the case of Ariadne and Theseus, there was no postal service between Naxos and Athens.

40 L. Fulkerson, *Chain(ed) Mail*, cit., pp. 123 ss.

line 123; for the greatest part of the text, Hypermnestra refers to his condition of *frater*, meaning «brother» or «cousin» (l. 1, l. 130), or to their common ancestry, with the patronymic *Belide* (l. 73), since both of them are Belus' grandchildren. She equally presents herself as *soror*, «sister» («if thou carest aught for thy sister», l. 123). These names are neutral enough to suggest that Hypermnestra's motivation is not an erotic one. However, Fulkerson passes over the fact that Hypermnestra refers to Lynceus also as *vir*, «man» or «husband» (l. 12) and *maritus*, «husband» (l. 19), and she mentions several times that she is married (*nupta*, l. 12) and wears purple robes (l. 51), as is usual in weddings.

Although Fulkerson's argument could be thus undermined, she is right when she states that Danaus is more present in Hypermnestra's mind than Lynceus. Right at the start, she imagines the punishment that her father will impose on her («My father may burn me with the flame...» l. 9). And her self-apostrophe starts equally with references to her father («A cruel father, Hypermnestra, thine; perform thy sire's command», ll. 53-4). This predominance could be explained by the fact that Hypermnestra barely knows her husband and therefore she cannot be fond of him, for reasons of time. On the other hand, the obsession with her father is easy to understand, since he gave the cruel order that caused her so much suffering.

In general, as we have seen, Hypermnestra is interested in presenting herself as *pia* (for the first time in l. 4) and *casta* (l. 50), and she highlights her female fragility and her young age («A woman am I, and a maid, gentle in nature and in years», l. 55). If her father intercepts her letter, he will know that Hypermnestra did not act just out of disobedience to his orders, but out of impotence and fear, and ultimately out of *pietas*, which can be understood in a religious sense (*quo mihi commisso non licet esse piae?*, «What crime have I committed that I must not be free from guilt?», l. 64). In fact, Hypermnestra confesses that she tried to commit murder, but she could not («thrice did my hand raise high the piercing blade, and thrice, having basely raised it, fell again», ll. 44-45). Finally, her *pietas* can be understood as filial piety: although she did not carry out



her father's order, she did not run away with Lynceus, although she theoretically could have.

It is true that Hypermnestra describes her father as *saevus*, «cruel» (l. 53), and *violentus*, «violent» (l. 43), but the underlying goal would not be to make him even more furious, but to make him recognize his error and repent of his horrendous crime («Let repentance for crime come to Danaus and my cruel sisters; this is the wonted event that follows on wicked deeds», ll. 15-6), and consequently forgive her. Therefore, according to this reading between the lines, our epistle does not seek reconciliation between «lovers» (a term that could hardly be applied to Hypermnestra and Lynceus), but reconciliation between a father and his daughter. A reconciliation that will certainly be difficult, considering the violent reaction on Danaus' part when he learned of Hypermnestra's abstention from the crime («I am seized by the hair, and dragged from my father's feet – such reward my love for duty won! – and thrust in gaol», l. 83).

#### CONCLUSION: RUBIK'S CUBE?

When analyzing a text like Epistle XIV, so rich but at the same time so condensed, it is difficult to resist the temptation to solve the puzzle and, as in a magic cube, combine the colors to determine what is elegiac, dramatic, epic, rhetorical... within the poem. It is legitimate to succumb, provided one does not fall into the extreme of considering the work a pastiche where the total effect is equal to the addition of the parts, as already cautioned by Tissol<sup>41</sup>. That is why we divided our analysis into thematic, not generic sections. It would be contrived to apply the title *suasoria* («suasory speech») to lines 53-66, or «epyllion» to lines 85-108. The use of rhetorical or epic elements is at the service of the overall effect, such that Hypermnestra's self-apostrophe is not only the reflection of her deliberation, but also an ethopoeia of herself and a confession letter to Lyceus. Likewise, Io's episode is not

41 Cited in J. C. Fernández Corte, *Ovidio. Metamorfosis, Libros I-V*, Madrid, Gredos, 2008, p. 43.

only an epic account of her fate, but also a psychological projection of Hypermnestra (like the Inachid, victim of an unwanted relation) and an etiological explanation of the protagonist's present suffering.

We wondered at the beginning whether the *Heroines* could even be considered epistles. Formal features, the reiterated mention of writing conditions and the distance between sender and receiver indeed make it possible. Does the letter fulfil the communicative function we would expect in a message of this sort, even if fictitious? *Jein*, as German speakers would say. Yes, insofar as Hypermnestra transmits to Lynceus information he could not have known, such as the confession about her attempt to kill him before she urges him to flee (although he may have suspected it when he saw her holding a sword) or how Danaus counted the corpses at dawn and imprisoned Hypermnestra because Lynceus was missing. Furthermore, at the end (l. 123 ss.) we find a marked conative function, since Hypermnestra asks Lynceus to save her or to bury her bones under an appropriate epitaph (this alone would legitimate the writing and sending of the letter).

If we answer «no», we could argue that the lion's share is not communication, but poetry and literature. Hypermnestra is a learned narrator –even Alexandrine, we could say– and she is aware of the possibilities offered by different literary genres for her own purposes: she uses rhetoric to express her stream of consciousness and to show her moral integrity; the epyllion to lay blame on inheritance and the apostrophe to third persons (Io) to unleash her restrained emotions; and tragic irony to justify that she alone among the Danaids realized that the Gods did not approve the crime and that she thus behaved accordingly. We find here the reflexivity and the ironic splitting that is so common in Ovid<sup>42</sup>: the main character becomes an image of the author, she is aware of the texts and genres she uses and she imitates –in the world of fiction– what the author is imitating at the level of literary history. Nevertheless, we as extradiegetic, modern readers

42 *Ibidem*, Ovidio, cit., 20 ss.

lose some of the intertextual references that the reading of Aeschylus' trilogy and Calvus' epyllion (among others) would permit. In any case, the esthetic pleasure is so intense that it seems not to have been diminished.

## APPENDIX: ENGLISH TRANSLATION

*Heroides*, translated by Grant Showerman. *Ovid Complete Works*.  
Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2012.

## XIV. HYPERMNESTRA TO LYNCEUS

[1] Hypermnestra sends this letter to the one brother left of so many but now alive – the rest of the company lied dead by the crime of their brides. Kept close in the palace am I, bound with heavy chains; and the cause of my punishment is that I was faithful. Because my hand shrank from driving into your throat the steel, I am charged with crime; I should be praised, had I but dared the deed. Better be charged with crime than thus to have pleased my sire; I feel no regret at having hands free from the shedding of blood. My father may burn me with the flame I would not violate, and hold to my face the torches that shone at my marriage rites; or he may lay to my throat the sword he falsely gave me, so that I, the wife, may die the death my husband did not die – yet he will not bring my dying lips to say “I repent me!” She is not faithful who regrets her faith. Let repentance for crime come to Danaus and my cruel sisters; this is the wonted event that follows on wicked deeds.

[17] My heart is struck with fear at remembrance of that night profaned with blood, and sudden trembling fetters the bones of my right hand. She you think capable of having compassed her husband’s death fears even to write of murder done by hands not her own!

[21] Yet I shall essay to write. Twilight had just settled on the earth; it was the last part of day and the first of night. We daughters of Inachus are escorted beneath the roof of great Pelasgus, and our husbands’ father himself receives the armed brides of his sons. On every side shine bright the lamps girt round with gold; unholy incense is scattered on unwilling altar-fires; the crowd cry “Hymen, Hymenaeus!” The god shuns their cry; Jove’s very consort has withdrawn from the city of her choice! Then, look you, confused with wine, they come in rout amidst the cries of their companions; with fresh flowers in their dripping locks, all joyously they burst into the bridal chambers – the bridal chambers, their own tombs! – and with their bodies press the couches that deserve to be funeral beds.

## APPENDIX: LATIN TEXT

P. Ovidius Naso. *Amores, Epistulae, Medicamina faciei femineae, Ars amatoria, Remedia amoris*. R. Ehwald. Edidit ex Rudolphi Merkelii recognitione. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1907.

*Hypermetra Lynceo*

Mittit Hypermetra de tot modo fratribus uni –  
 Cetera nuptarum crimine turba iacet.  
 Clausa domo teneor gravibusque coercita vinclis;  
 Est mihi supplicii causa fuisse piam.  
 Quod manus extimuit iugulo demittere ferrum, 5  
 Sum rea; laudarer, si scelus ausa forem.  
 Esse ream praestat, quam sic placuisse parenti;  
 Non piget immunes caedis habere manus.  
 Me pater igne licet, quem non violavimus, urat,  
 Quaeque aderant sacris, tendat in ora faces; 10  
 Aut illo iugulet, quem non bene tradidit ense,  
 Ut, qua non cecidit vir nece, nupta cadam –  
 Non tamen, ut dicant morientia 'paenitet!' ora,  
 Efficiet. non est, quam piget esse, pia.  
 Paeniteat sceleris Danaum saevasque sorores; 15  
 Hic solet eventus facta nefanda sequi.  
 Cor pavet admonitu temeratae sanguine noctis,  
 Et subitus dextrae praepedit ossa tremor.  
 Quam tu caede putes fungi potuisse mariti,  
 Scribere de facta non sibi caede timet! 20  
 Sed tamen experiar. modo facta crepuscula terris;  
 Ultima pars lucis primaque noctis erat.  
 Ducimur Inachides magni sub tecta Pelasgi,  
 Et socer armatas accipit ipse nurus.  
 Undique conlucent praecinctae lampades auro; 25  
 Dantur in invitos in pia tura focos;  
 Vulgus 'Hymen, Hymenae!' vocant. fugit ille vocantis;  
 Ipsa Iovis coniunx cessit ab urbe sua!  
 Ecce, mero dubii, comitum clamore frequentes,  
 Flore novo madidas inpediente comas, 30  
 In thalamos laeti –thalamos, sua busta!– feruntur  
 Strataque corporibus funere digna premunt.

[33] And now, heavy with food and wine they lay in sleep, and deep repose had settled on Argos, free from care – when round about me I seemed to hear the groans of dying men; nay, I heard indeed, and what I feared was true. My blood retreated, warmth left my body and soul, and on my newly-wedded couch all chill I lay. As the gentle zephyr sets a-quiver the slender stalk of grain, as wintry breezes shake the poplar leaves, even thus – yea even more – did I tremble. Yourself lay quiet; the wine I had given you was the wine of sleep.

[43] Thought of my violent father's mandates struck away my fear. I rise, and clutch with trembling hand the steel. I will not tell you aught untrue: thrice did my hand raise high the piercing blade, and thrice, having basely raised it, fell again. I brought it to your throat – let me confess to you the truth! – I brought my father's weapon to your throat; but fear and tenderness kept me from daring the cruel stroke, and my chaste right hand refused the task enjoined. Rending the purple robes I wore, rending my hair, I spoke with scant sound such words as these: "A cruel father, Hypermnestra, thine; perform thy sire's command, let thy husband there go join his brethren! A woman am I, and a maid, gentle in nature and in years; my tender hands ill suit fierce weapons. But come, while he lies there, do like as the brave sisters – it well may be that all have slain their husbands! Yet had this hand power to deal out murder at all, it would be bloody with the death of its own mistress. They have deserved this end for seizing on their uncle's realms; we, helpless band, must wander in exile with our aged, helpless sire. Yet suppose our husbands have deserved to die – what have we done ourselves? What crime have I committed that I must not be free from guilt? What have swords to do with me? What has a girl to do with the weapons of war? More suited to my hands are the distaff and the wool."

[67] Thus I to myself; and while I utter my complaint, my tears follow forth the words that start them, and from my eyes fall down upon your body. While you grope for my embrace and toss your slumberous arms, your hand is almost wounded by my blade. And now fear of my father seized on me, and of my father's minions, and of the light of dawn; I drove away your sleep with these words of mine:

Iamque cibo vinoque graves somnoque iacebant,  
 Securumque quies alta per Argos erat –  
 Circum me gemitus morientum audire videbar; 35  
 Et tamen audibam, quodque verebar erat.  
 Sanguis abit, mentemque calor corpusque relinquit,  
 Inque novo iacui frigida facta toro.  
 Ut leni Zephyro graciles vibrantur aristae,  
 Frigida populeas ut quatit aura comas, 40  
 Aut sic, aut etiam tremui magis. ipse iacebas,  
 Quemque tibi dederant vina, soporis eras.  
 Excussere metum violenti iussa parentis;  
 Erigor et capio tela tremente manu.  
 Non ego falsa loquar: ter acutum sustulit ensem, 45  
 Ter male sublato reccidit ense manus.  
 Admovi iugulo –sine me tibi vera fateri!–  
 Admovi iugulo tela paterna tuo;  
 Sed timor et pietas crudelibus obstitit ausis,  
 Castaque mandatum dextra refugit opus. 50  
 Purpureos laniata sinus, laniata capillos  
 Exiguo dixi talia verba sono:  
 ‘Saevus, Hypermnestra, pater est tibi; iussa parentis  
 Effice; germanis sit comes iste suis!  
 Femina sum et virgo, natura mitis et annis; 55  
 Non faciunt molles ad fera tela manus.  
 Quin age, dumque iacet, fortis imitare sorores –  
 Credibile est caesos omnibus esse viros!  
 Si manus haec aliquam posset committere caedem,  
 Morte foret dominae sanguinolenta suae. 60  
 Hanc meruere necem patruelia regna tenendo;  
 Cum sene nos inopi turba vagamur inops.  
 Finge viros meruisse mori – quid fecimus ipsae?  
 Quo mihi commisso non licet esse piae?  
 Quid mihi cum ferro? quo bellica tela puellae? 65  
 Aptior est digitis lana colusque meis.’  
 Haec ego; dumque queror, lacrimae sua verba sequuntur  
 Deque meis oculis in tua membra cadunt.  
 Dum petis amplexus sopitaque bracchia iactas,  
 Paene manus telo saucia facta tua est. 70  
 Iamque patrem famulosque patris lucemque timebam  
 Expulerunt somnos haec mea dicta tuos:

“Rise up, away, O child of Belus, the one brother left of so many but now alive! This night unless you haste, will be forever night to you!” In terror you arise; all sleep’s dullness flies away; you behold the strenuous weapon in my timorous hand. You ask the cause. “While night permits,” I answer, “fly!” While the dark night permits, you fly, and I remain.

[79] ‘Twas early morn, and Danaus counted o’er his sons-in-law that lay there slain. You alone lack to make the crime complete. He bears ill the loss of a single kinsman’s death, and complains that too little blood was shed. I am seized by the hair, and dragged from my father’s feet – such reward my love for duty won! – and thrust in gaol.

[85] Clear it is that Juno’s wrath endures from the time the mortal maid became a heifer, and the heifer became a goddess. Yet it is punishment enough that the tender maid was a lowing beast, and, but now so fair, could not retain Jove’s love. On the banks of her sire’s stream the new-created heifer stood, and in the parental waters beheld the horns that were not her own; with mouth that tried to complain, she gave forth only lowings; she felt terror at her form, and terror at her voice. Why rage, unhappy one? Why gaze at thyself in the water’s shadow? Why count the feet thou hast for thy new-created frame? Thou art the mistress of great Jove, that rival to be dreaded by his sister – and must quiet thy fierce hunger with the leafy branch and grassy turf, drink at the spring, and gaze astonished on thine image there, and fear lest the arms thou bearest may wound thyself! Thou, who but now wert rich, so rich as to seem worthy even of Jove, liest naked upon the naked ground. Over seas, and lands, and kindred streams dost thou course; the sea opens a way for thee, and the rivers, and the land. What is the cause of thy flight? Why doest thou wander over the long seas? Thou wilt not be able to fly from thine own features. Child of Inachus, whither doest thou haste? Thou followest and fliest – the same; thou art thyself guide to thy companion, thou art companion to thy guide!

[107] The Nile, let flow to the sea through seven mouths, strips from the maddened heifer the features loved of Jove. Why talk of far-off things, told me by hoary eld? My own years, look you, give



'Surge age, Belide, de tot modo fratribus unus!  
 Nox tibi, ni properas, ista perennis erit!  
 Territus exurgis; fugit omnis inertia somni; 75  
 Adspicis in timida fortia tela manu.  
 Quaerenti causam 'dum nox sinit, effuge!' dixi.  
 Dum nox atra sinit, tu fugis, ipsa moror.  
 Mane erat, et Danaus generos ex caede iacentis  
 Dinumerat. summae criminis unus abes. 80  
 Fert male cognatae iacturam mortis in uno  
 Et queritur facti sanguinis esse parum.  
 Abstrahor a patriis pedibus, raptamque capillis –  
 Haec meruit pietas praemia!– carcer habet.  
 Scilicet ex illo Iunonia permanet ira, 85  
 Cum bos ex homine est, ex bove facta dea.  
 At satis est poenae teneram mugisse puellam  
 Nec, modo formosam, posse placere Iovi.  
 Adstitit in ripa liquidi nova vacca parentis,  
 Cornuaque in patriis non sua vidit aquis, 90  
 Conatoque queri mugitus edidit ore  
 Territaque est forma, territa voce sua.  
 Quid furis, infelix? quid te miraris in umbra?  
 Quid numeras factos ad nova membra pedes?  
 Illa Iovis magni paelex metuenda sorori 95  
 Fronde levas nimiam caespitibusque famem,  
 Fonte bibis spectasque tuam stupefacta figuram  
 Et, te ne feriant, quae geris, arma, times,  
 Quaeque modo, ut posses etiam Iove digna videri,  
 Dives eras, nuda nuda recumbis humo. 100  
 Per mare, per terras cognataque flumina curris;  
 Dat mare, dant amnes, dat tibi terra viam.  
 Quae tibi causa fugae? quid tu freta longa pererras?  
 Non poteris vultus effugere ipsa tuos.  
 Inachi, quo properas? eadem sequerisque fugisque; 105  
 Tu tibi dux comiti, tu comes ipsa duci.  
 Per septem Nilus portus emissus in aequor  
 Exiit insana paelicis ora bove.  
 Ultima quid refero, quorum mihi cana senectus  
 Auctor? dant anni, quod querar, ecce, mei. 110  
 Bella pater patruusque gerunt; regnoque domoque

me matter for lament. My father and my uncle are at war; we are driven from our realms and from our home; we are cast away to the farthest parts of earth. Of the number of the brothers but a scantest part remains. For those who were done to death, and for those who did the deed, I weep; as many brothers as I have lost, so many sisters also have I lost. Let both their companies receive my tears! Lo, I, because you live, am kept for the torments of punishment; but what shall be the fate of guilt, when I am charged with crime for deeds of praise, and fall, unhappy that I am, once the hundredth member of a kindred throng, of whom one brother only now remains?

[123] But do thou, O Lynceus, if thou carest aught for thy sister, and art worthy of the gift I rendered thee, come bear me aid; or, if it pleases thee, abandon me to death, and, when my body is done with life, lay it in secret on the funeral pile, and bury my bones moistened with faithful tears, and let my sepulchre be graved with this brief epitaph: "Exiled Hypermnestra, as the unjust price of her wifely deed, has herself endured the death she warded from her brother!"

[131] I would write more; but my hand falls with the weight of my chains, and very fear takes away my strength.

Pellimur; eiectos ultimus orbis habet.  
De fratrum populo pars exiguissima restat. 115  
    Quique dati leto, quaeque dedere, fleo;  
Nam mihi quot fratres, totidem periere sorores.  
    Accipiat lacrimas utraque turba meas!  
En, ego, quod vivis, poenae crucianda reservor;  
    Quid fiet sonti, cum rea laudis agar 120  
Et consanguineae quondam centesima turbae  
    Infelix uno fratre manente cadam?  
At tu, siqua pia, Lynceu, tibi cura sororis,  
    Quaeque tibi tribui munera, dignus habes,  
Vel fer opem, vel dede neci defunctaque vita 125  
    Corpora furtivis insuper adde rogis,  
Et sepeli lacrimis perfusa fidelibus ossa,  
    Sculptaque sint titulo nostra sepulcra brevi:  
'Exul Hypermestra, pretium pietatis iniquum,  
    Quam mortem fratri depulit, ipsa tulit.' 130  
Scribere plura libet, sed pondere lapsa catenae  
    Est manus, et vires subtrahit ipse timor.